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# TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING PEOPLE

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## Background

Hearing disabilities may occur at any time in a person's life, and hearing abilities vary widely. Some are born with no hearing, while others lose it gradually over time. Whether a person has a memory of sound can make a difference in the way they experience language, including written language. People who are Deaf or hard of hearing may use words differently. Remember, sign language may be their primary language, and English a second language.

Deaf and hard of hearing people communicate in different ways, depending on several factors – age at which deafness began, type of deafness, language skills, speech abilities, personality, intelligence, family environment, and educational background. Some individuals are more easily understood than others. Some use speech only ... or a combination of sign language, fingerspelling, and speech ... or writing ... or body language and facial expression.

## Communication Strategies

You can communicate in several ways. Remember – Deaf and hard of hearing people have successfully navigated a “hearing world” for years and are quite willing to help facilitate communication. The key is to find out which combination of techniques works best with each person. Keep in mind that it’s not how you exchange ideas but that you do.

For someone who primarily uses sign language, these guidelines for customer service should be used when the communication will be short, simple and straightforward. If the information being conveyed is more complex, is of longer duration or is related to medical or legal matters, you will need to engage the services of a sign language interpreter. For more information, see the Tips for Using a Sign Language Interpreter fact sheet at <http://kcweb.metrokc.gov/dias/ocre/interp.pdf>.

## One-to-One

**Get the deaf person’s attention** before speaking. Call out the person’s name – if that is not successful, a tap on the shoulder, a wave, or another visual signal should work.

**Identify who you are.** Introduce yourself or show your name badge or business card.

**Ask about communication strategy.** Ask if it would be helpful to communicate by writing or by using a computer terminal to type back and forth. (See “In Writing” below)

**Background noise.** The noise level in a room can make a big difference. Be aware that a customer with partial hearing may have trouble hearing in certain situations. You may need to converse in a quiet place with little or no background noise.

**Alert the Deaf person to the topic of discussion.** Deaf people need to know what the subject matter is to be discussed in order to pick up words that help them follow conversation. This is especially important for Deaf people who depend on speechreading.

**Speak slowly and clearly,** but don't speak loudly, exaggerate, or over-pronounce words. Exaggeration and overemphasis of words distorts lip movements, making speechreading more difficult. Try to enunciate each word, without force or tension. Short sentences are easier to understand than long ones.

**Look directly at the person** when speaking. Avoid talking while turning away to pull something from a bookcase or file.

**Maintain eye contact.** Eye contact conveys the feeling of direct communication. Even if a sign language interpreter is present, continue to speak directly to the Deaf person, who will turn to the interpreter as needed.

**Do not have anything in your mouth** when speaking. Mustaches that obscure the lips, smoking, gum or pencil chewing, and leaning your face in your hand all make it difficult for a Deaf person to follow what is being said.

**Use "I" and "you"** when communicating through an interpreter, not "Tell him..." or "Does she understand?"

**Avoid standing in front of a light source,** such as a window or bright light. The glare and shadows on the face make it almost impossible for the Deaf person to speechread.

**If you have problems being understood, first repeat, and then try to rephrase a thought,** rather than repeating the same words again. Try communicating by pen and paper if necessary. Getting the message across is more important than the medium used.

**Use pantomime, body language, and facial expression** to help supplement your communication. A lively speaker always is more interesting to watch.

**Be courteous during conversation.** If the telephone rings or someone knocks at the door, do not ignore the Deaf person and carry on a conversation while the Deaf person waits. Excuse yourself and tell the Deaf person what you are doing.

**Potential speech issues.** Some Deaf or hard of hearing people may not speak or may have speech that is difficult to understand. Focus on listening and communicating.

- Be patient and take as much time as necessary.
- If you don't understand something, do not pretend that you do. Ask the person to repeat what was said, and then repeat it back.
- Try to ask questions that require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Avoid barriers like glass partitions and distractions, such as noisy, public places.
- Discuss private or personal matters in a private place to avoid staring or eavesdropping by others, as you would for any customer.

**Note:** An individual may bring along someone to act as an interpreter when conducting brief business with the county. Remember to direct your attention and communication to the Deaf or hard of hearing person rather than to the interpreter.

## **In a Group**

**Ask about communication strategy.** As in one-to-one situations, ask the person what communication option(s) will be effective – sign language interpreter, assistive listening device, note taker, etc.

**Use an interpreter in a large group setting.** In these situations, an interpreter makes communication much more effective for participants who primarily use sign language. The interpreter will be a few words behind the speaker in translating the information, so allow time for the Deaf person to obtain all the information and to ask questions.

**Use a note taker** when possible to record information. It is difficult for many Deaf or hard of hearing individuals to pay attention to a speaker and take notes simultaneously.

**Assistive listening devices.** If you plan to use an assistive listening device, familiarize yourself with its operation. Read the instruction booklet and test it beforehand.

**Seat the Deaf or hard of hearing person to his/her best advantage.** This usually means a seat near the speaker, so that the person can see the speaker's lips. If possible, use a round table or semi-circular seating so that everyone can see each other's faces. Take lighting into consideration, so that the speaker and interpreter are clearly seen. Usually, the Deaf person and interpreter will know best where to sit.

**Provide new vocabulary in advance.** It is difficult to speech read or read the finger spelling of unfamiliar vocabulary. If new vocabulary cannot be presented in advance, write the terms on paper, a whiteboard, or overhead projector. If giving a lecture or showing a film, a brief outline or script provided in advance helps people follow the presentation.

**Avoid unnecessary pacing and speaking** when writing on a whiteboard or flip board. It is difficult to speechread a person in motion, and impossible to speechread someone whose back is turned. Write or draw on the board, then face the group and explain it. If you use an overhead projector or computer with projector, do not look down at it while speaking.

**Use visual aids if possible.** Vision is a Deaf and hard of hearing person's primary channel for receiving information. Make full use of visual aids, such as films, overhead projectors, diagrams, and whiteboards. Give participants time to read the information before you proceed with the presentation.

**Make sure the Deaf person doesn't miss vital information.** Write out any changes in meeting times, special assignments, additional instructions, etc. Allow extra time when referring to manuals and texts, since Deaf and hard of hearing people must look the written material, and then return their attention to the speaker or interpreter.

**Slow down the pace of communication slightly** to facilitate understanding. Many speakers talk too fast. Allow extra time for the person to ask or answer questions.

**Repeat questions or statements** made from the back of the room and point to the person speaking. Remember, Deaf and hard of hearing people are cut off from whatever happens outside their visual area.

**Allow full participation by the Deaf or hard of hearing person** in the discussion. It is difficult for them to participate in group discussions because they are not sure when the speakers have finished. Be aware of turn taking and give the person a chance to look at the various participants before each speaks.

**Use hands-on experience** whenever possible in training situations. Like other people, Deaf and hard of hearing people learn quickly by "doing".

### **In Writing**

Ask a Deaf or hard of hearing person if they wish to use written communication, but don't assume that this is the preferred method. Their English and writing skills may depend on whether their hearing loss was present at birth or developed later in life, what teaching method was used in their education, and which communication method they prefer. If the person is Deaf and has low vision (Deaf-Blind), use a black felt-tip pen for better readability.

**Keep your message short and simple.** Establish the subject area, avoid assumptions, and make your sentences concise.

**It is not necessary to write out every word.** Short phrases or a few words often are sufficient to transfer the information.

**Don't use "yes" and "no" questions.** Open-ended questions ensure a response that allows you to see if your message was understood correctly.

**Face the Deaf person after you have written your message.** If you can see each other's facial expressions, communication will be easier and more effective.

**Use visual representations** if you are explaining specific or technical vocabulary. Drawings, photos, diagrams, etc., help the person comprehend the information.

### **Service Animals**

Some Deaf or hard of hearing people use service animals called "hearing dogs" or "signal dogs" which alert them to sounds such as a telephone, doorbell, fire alarm, or car horn. King County permits service animals to accompany their owners within county facilities. These animals are not required to have any special identification card, collar or harness. For more information, see the "Commonly Asked Questions about Service Animals" fact sheet at <http://kcweb.metrokc.gov/dias/ocre/animals.pdf>.

### **How to Alert Customers and Clients About Your Accessibility**

Make sure your department's customers and clients who are Deaf or hard of hearing know you have accessible services. One way is to include the statewide Telecommunications Relay Service number (711) on printed material you share with the public. Here are some symbols that denote access for the Deaf community:



TTY



Interpreter Services



Volume Control  
Telephone



Assistive Listening  
System